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AUTHOR Thody, Philip
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ABSTRACT

Languages have lost status in the educational system, and oral skills are less effectively and rigorously taught. However, a University of Leeds program providing short, intensive courses in administrative and legal French for British civil servants has been found to be very effective in developing the participants' oral and aural skills. The nature of the course and of its students would make it difficult to transfer directly to college language teaching, but university language departments can benefit from the University of Leeds experience if they are willing to change the structure and content of their curriculum. Departments could design similar intensive courses using texts on tape and in print and requiring substantial independent research and writing on a specific topic. Students should be encouraged to take two courses in different languages, focusing on different topics. Students would be graded on oral skills, written skills, and content knowledge in equal proportions. This approach might mean abandoning traditional humanistic language course content, and all language departments would have to introduce the courses simultaneously for the plan to be successful. Some institutions are already trying similar approaches, and the profession can also learn from their experiences. (MSE)

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THE PLACE OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN THE HIERARCHY OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

Philip Thody

University of Leeds

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THE PLACE OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN THE HIERARCHY OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

Philip Thody

University of Leeds

I should like to begin, if I may, by expressing my thanks and offering an apology. My thanks go, of course, to the organisers of this conference for inviting me to address you today. For I am a representative of a sister and neighbouring university which has, in the past, tended to adopt what is known as a traditionalist approach to the study of modern languages. The extent to which this approach may perhaps be changing will, I hope, become clearer in the course of what I have to say, and one of the reasons for this possible change is linked to the apology with which I am also beginning this talk. For my reason for arriving late, and for not being able to attend more than a small number of the other sessions, is very simple. I am at the moment in the middle of the twenty-fourth of the intensive courses in administrative and legal French which we are currently putting on in Leeds for a group of Senior British civil servants from a variety of Ministries in Whitehall. The kind of teaching which we offer in these courses, which began some eleven years ago, when it became obvious that this country was going to join the European Community, is indeed the immediate reason for my being invited to address you. The basis for my apology is therefore, as they say, a fairly relevant one. But I would like to make the apology, and to say how much I am looking forward to seeing the other contributions in print. It is indeed a great honour as well as a great pleasure to be here, and I am sure that the conference will be a great success.

One of the clearest and most uncomfortable memories which I have of my schooldays is of my relationship with the gym master - or, as we would say nowadays, the P.E. specialist. He was a likeable man, who in spite of having been recently demobilised from the Army for reasons of age - this was in 1943 - was still quite extraordinarily agile. Indeed, until the Olympic gymnasts began to appear on the television screen, I had never seen his like for doing double back flips on a narrow bar, for vaulting backwards over a horse, for suspending himself upside down for long periods from whatever parallel bars happened to be available, and for swinging Tarzan-like on the ropes and rings above the school swimming pool. Unfortunately, however, my admiration was sensibly diminished by the fact that he expected me to perform the same feats, and gave vent to a number of critical remarks about my character, personality, and general unsuitability to lead men in battle - this was in 1943 - as he became increasingly aware of how totally unable I was to imitate him.

Eventually, we reached a compromise, whereby I was allowed to climb ropes - the one thing, curiously enough, that I could do - while he went off with the more athletic members of the form and initiated them into the mysteries of

his craft. Yet I was not - and here, I hope, the relevance of these reminiscencies will start to become clear - the only person whose physical skills stood in the same relationship to his as my students' verbal and intellectual skills stand to mine. Indeed, I represented more or less the norm as far as the level of ability in the school as a whole was concerned and we were consequently all a great trial to the man who was universally and quite affectionately known as the Sergeant-Major. For he genuinely could not understand why we had such difficulty in emulating him. For him the art of doing a one-two-three jump over a five foot high vaulting horse was as simple and easy as it is for me nowadays - and has been for some time - to discuss existentialism, Marxism, structuralism, Shakespeare and the musical glasses either in English or French for hours on end without stopping except for the occasional intake of alcohol. So that whenever I feel a certain impatience at the extremely tongue-tied performance which my students put up either in a tutorial or in an examination situation, I try to think back to Sergeant-Major Perry and borrow some of the patience which he eventually acquired.

There is, however, an important difference. Since P.E., like the rules of cricket and articles of faith of the Anglican Church, was a compulsory part of the curriculum at my school, there was some excuse for those of us who were not very good at it. After all, we had not elected to come to the school principally to do P.E. There were other things we could do - I was especially good at remembering the dates of battles and writing essays on goodness, beauty and truth - so that we did have something to fall back on. But when the students who have chosen to come to the French Department at Leeds, and have proved their suitability to do so by obtaining B in French, B in a second subject and C in a third, show a total inability to handle the spoken word, in English as well as in French, I sometimes wonder whether I am not the victim of some malign pedagogic jester, a tormentor akin to the one who once sent a colleague of mine in the Department of Fine Art an undergraduate who was colour-blind. Not, I may add, that I regard my students at Leeds as particularly bad in this respect. I was once examining at another University, which shall be nameless, and was having a somewhat halting conversation with a young man who was in the process of taking Final Honours in French and German. After fifteen rather painful minutes, he eventually entrusted me with his hitherto secret but nevertheless firmly held view. He considered that the human species had taken a wrong turning along the evolutionary path when it had decided to adopt language as its principal mode of communication.

It may well be, of course, that it is because of some dim apprehension of how many students actually do hold this view that University courses in foreign languages have, until fairly recently, attached relatively little importance to the use of the modern spoken language. Indeed, even nowadays, this rarely constitutes more than an eighth of the total marks awarded in Finals; and in none of the ten Universities which have so far paid me the honour of inviting me to act as External Examiner in French has there been any kind of basic mark which the candidate must obtain at the oral examination before being awarded an Honours Degree. Had there been such a hurdle, then between a half and two thirds of the candidates I have examined would have failed, and

this would not have been brought about by the application of the linguistic equivalent of Sergeant-Major Perry's criteria of what constituted physical fitness. Although some of the candidates I have examined at Polytechnics have been a little less tongue-tied than the average University student, there is no doubt in my mind that the ability of most graduates in French to speak the language in a coherent and interesting manner is woefully inadequate. The question is, whose fault is it? Is it theirs, for failing to acquire in a foreign tongue the fluency which they generally do not possess in their own? Or is it ours, for expecting them to develop while under our tuition a set of skills which we make no real attempt to communicate to them?

It is a question which I often ask myself, as I ponder the question which I have been invited to discuss today: not only that of the place of spoken language in the hierarchy of language skills but also that of the transferability to a University Honours Course in modern languages of the philosophy and technique of instruction which have characterised the twenty-three courses which we have put on during the last ten years in Administrative and Legal French for Senior British Civil Servants. For these courses have proved successful, and I have a number of reasons for saying this. If they had not done so, the Whitehall Ministries which pay for them would not be sending us so many pupils. For the cost is some £650 per head for eleven days full board and intensive tuition, and this is a sum which is at one and the same time sufficiently small to be understood by the economy experts in Whitehall and sufficiently large to be at the receiving end of the cuts which these experts apply if they receive unfavourable reports. Moreover, both our victims - that is to say, the Civil Servants attending - and ourselves have noticed a distinct improvement in their ability to understand and to speak French at the end of the eleven day period which they spend with us and in which they are allowed - and allow themselves - to use no other language. The instruction which they receive begins at nine in the morning and goes on until nine-thirty in the evening. And it includes a number of different linguistic exercises.

These include some twenty-two hours in the language laboratory, in which they concentrate not only on the usual linguistic drills but also on the understanding and transmission of messages containing numbers. We require them to make telephone calls in French, with the usual obstacles - simulated, of course - which French secretaries and concierges can create, and to write a letter confirming in writing th arrangements made verbally. For I do not myself think that skill in speaking a language can for long be divorced from the ability to it. This is something which can be tested everyday by listening to the way people speak and seeing how they write their own native language, and if we had our civil servants for longer, we should certainly want to give them more written exercises. 'Writing', as Bacon observed 'maketh an exact man', and I am not convinced myself, if I may digress away from what we do with our civil servants and towards the official title of my task, that there is any dichotomy between the ability to write and the ability to speak a language. It is of course the case, as I expect most teachers here will have noticed, that most of our students do write both their own language and the foreign language they are studying a good deal better than they speak it. This is an impression which underlies what I shall have to say later about the

question of confidence and national attitudes towards communication, when I come to what might be the more optimistic side of my talk.

Our civil servants are also taught the correct way to write a letter in French, are taken through a specimen set of committee minutes in French, are given lectures on Community law, on French history and the structure of the French civil service, with particular reference to the role of the Grands Corps de l'Etat. They are told about le franglais, les faux amis, and French Trade Unions. They spend some fifteen hours analysing texts which are particularly relevant to their own area of expertise - one of my colleagues, incidentally, became something of an expert herself on les maladies des arbres fruitiers, and at one stage I myself understood not only le système monétaire européen but also les montants compensatoires - and have the unusual and, I am told, stimulating experience of being interviewed in French in front of a television camera and having their performance played back to them. They also have some fifteen hours in conversation with French native speakers, and some ten hours each of individual tuition. They do a certain amount of prose work - yes; in its place, it can be quite a useful tool, and I shall be coming back to this point - and are required, before they come, to do a fairly stiff grammar test which one of my colleagues then marks and spends four hours analysing with them. There are a number of other exercises which are a little complicated to explain but which fit into what I hope is a simple but consistent philosophy of language teaching.

This is organised round two central principles: you make it absolutely full-time; and you ensure that it is constantly relevant to the perceived interests and immediate needs of the participants. You thus avoid the problem which Eric Hawkins aptly summarised when he described the normal way in which we teach modern languages against a constant background of English as 'gardening in a gale'. For I need hardly add that the only language spoken at mealtimes and in the bar is French. We also avoid the criticism most frequently voiced by undergraduates who are asked to comment on their courses in modern languages. For it is a fact that the development of ecce ille into celui-ci is not always perceived as immediately relevant to the problems of chatting up the birds in Toulouse or trying to obtain a reader's ticket at the Bibliothèque Nationale, any more, for that matter, than is Stendhal's treatment of the Napoleonic myth in Le Rouge et le Noir, or even Sartre's struggle with the problem of freedom. In contrast, the concentration on the topics in which our civil servants have a professional interest is probably the most important factor in producing what I think is the final proof of how successful these courses are. Our civil servants talk. They talk to us to the point where we occasionally find difficulty in giving them the instruction which we planned. And they talk to one another, in French, even - or perhaps I should say, especially - when we are not there. The Civil Service College, under whose auspices we put these courses on, are very pleased with us.

But you will probably have realised, even as I explained what we do with our civil servants, how very hard it would be to translate this into a University course. To begin with, it presupposes not only a staff-student ratio of

roughly two to one. It also requires a readiness on the part of the teachers involving themselves in these courses to work a very full day. I have mentioned the regret which I feel at not being able to attend the rest of this conference, and hope now that you will appreciate why I cannot stay. It would be unfair if I expected my colleagues to be there for breakfast, dinner, lunch and tea if I am not going to be present myself, and a course of this kind can work only if the members of the teaching staff look upon it as a ten hour a day job. Not many University teachers are going to do this even for a brief period, and I doubt whether even Sir Keith Joseph would expect it to form a normal part of one's contractual obligations over a whole academic year. It is also difficult to see how courses of this kind can be fitted into the university year as it is presently constituted -though I shall be coming to this - or how they could be combined with the subsidiaries in Philosophy or Greco-Roman civilisation which so often accompany an Honours course in French, German or Spanish.

There are also a number of other, pedagogically more interesting reasons why the techniques which have proved so successful with French at Leeds that they are currently being used with German at UMIST, cannot be easily adapted to the teaching of undergraduates. The first of these is perhaps best illustrated by the reintroduction of Sergeant-Major Perry and his vaulting horse. For it was not only because they were already fairly athletic and good at jumping over things that members of the first eleven also showed themselves adept at the exercises set for us by the Sergeant-Major. Such pupils also had a certain amount of physical confidence in themselves which enabled them not only to approach the parallel bars with confidence but also to adjust themselves without much psychological disturbance to any failure to do the double back flip considered an essential accomplishment in any future tank commander. After all, they knew that they could run rings round the Sergeant-Major if he were ever to venture out onto the football field with them, and the same applies, pari passu, to any Counsellor from the FCO or Assistant Secretary from the Ministry of the Environment who finds the linguistic exercises set for them at Leeds a little beyond their immediate comprehension. For if they were to feel dispirited by their failure to use the imperfect of the subjunctive correctly or to translate neuf cent soixante dix-sept mille, sept cent quatre vingt dix-huit immediately into English, they would be able to find immediate consolation in the indubitable fact that I would cut a very poor figure indeed if asked to explain the complexities of Albanian foreign policy, or the most recent European Community ruling on the transport of dangerous chemicals, and on which they are the acknowledged experts. For one of the reasons why our undergraduates are so reluctant to say anything in a foreign language is that they are, as it were, putting their whole personality and ideal self-image on the line every time they open their mouth. Since they know nothing at all apart from French, German or Spanish, and not even these very well, they have absolutely nothing to fall back on. This is indeed once of the major factors inhibiting the development of oral skills among undergraduates reading modern languages at the University, and it is very difficult to see what can be done to give our students the confidence needed to chance their arm, to make mistakes, and thus to improve in the only way possible: by having these mistakes corrected.

This is something which our civil servants are prepared to do, and I think it is a strong argument in favour of a more general change in the pattern of higher Education in this country. For I have always held the view that University education, like claret and sex, is somewhat wasted on the young, and the experience of teaching French at a fairly high level to small numbers of intelligent and highly motivated adults has reinforced this prejudice. We ought, in the Universities, to be planning a lot more courses of this kind for adults who missed out on some aspect of their education when they were in their late teens or early twenties. It is one of the ways in which we are going to survive when the effects of the falling birthrate of the late sixties and early seventies begin to show themselves.

I should of course have added, when describing the different techniques which we adopt for our civil servants, that we require of anyone coming on our course roughly the equivalent of an A-level pass in French. The fact that we always have a waiting list for the eighteenplaces available on each course says much for the argument that early and compulsory exposure to modern languages teaching does leave circuits in the brain which are relatively easily reactivated. Before they come to us, our civil servants are also encouraged to spend thirty or forty hours brushing up their French, generally with the help of the Diplomatic Service Language Centre. This, too, is arranged by the Civil Service College, which also does the job of advertising our courses, processing applications, and deciding who is going to come. The mundane details of how much money it is going to cost, where our civil servants are going to live - in a very comfortable Hall of Residence now called Fairburn House, and which used to be Albert Mansbridge College - and who is going to meet them at the station, are handled by the Special Courses Division of the University's Department of Adult and Further Education.

There are also, however, other reasons why any systematic transfer to undergraduate courses in modern languages of the techniques of instruction which we have used for the last eleven years with our Higher Executive Officers, our translators, our ambassadors, and our experts in pig marketing will not be a straightforward or easy undertaking. For not only will such a transfer come up against the psychological difficulties, which I have already tried to adumbrate, of applying to adolescents a set of techniques designed primarily with adults in mind. It will also involve a complete revision of the ideas which have, up to now, inspired the teaching of modern languages in our universities. A good deal, in other words, will have to go, and I am not sure that the price we shall be required to pay will not be too high.

For in most Universities, the underlying philosophy of modern language teaching has not been a utilitarian one, and has not been consciously aimed at improving oral fluency. These models, from cognate if somewhat different disciplines, have tended to dominate it. On the one hand, there has been the shadow of F.R. Leavis, on the other the vision of either classical or modern Greats. We have tried, in other words, to make our students either into literary critics, or into historical philologists, or into people with some nodding acquaintance of how to apply a knowledge of politics, philosophy or economics to the understanding of a foreign culture. Each of these aims has

been seen as involving a somewhat lengthy process, needing a full three if not four years, and the application of what you might call gradual impregnation rather than total immersion. For as I am sure we have all noticed, metaphors describing language learning always seem to come from an aquatic context, and we habitually refer to 'total immersion' when speaking of our courses for civil servants, with everything that this implies by way of the danger of drowning. But total immersion of the kind we have practised on our twenty-five year old translators, our thirty-five year old Assistant Principals, our forty-five year old Under Secretaries and our fifty year old Ambassadors is not really compatible with the study by eighteen or nineteen year olds of Spanish literature of the Golden Age, the novels of Franz Kafka, or the French theatre of the seventeenth century.

I realise that I have so far brought you, as Anglican priests say when speaking of South Africa, nought for your comfort. Indeed, there has even been a touch of the disillusioned tones which Sergeant-Major Perry used to adopt towards my schoolfellows and myself as he compared us, to our understandable disadvantage, with the men he had had under his command for what he called 'full-time training'. The implication invariably was that he could make even us perform somersaults over the parallel bars if he had us at his disposal for twenty-four hours a day, though in this respect I am very different from him. I am under no illusion as to my ability to make my students speak with greater fluency, even if I were to subject them to the kind of treatment we mete out to our civil servants. Most of them have given me to understand, when I have taxed them with their taciturnity, that they remain silent because they have nothing to say. As a very talkative person myself, I find this difficult to believe, much as an alcoholic can have no imaginative grasp of the phenomenon of teetotalism, and I should like to make it clear that I attach no general virtue whatsoever to fluency of speech. My ideal is a taciturn Chartered Accountant whose hobbies are Do-It-Yourself and playing long rounds of silent golf, and it is only as a result of the triumph of genes over aspirations that I am standing here today. As a private man, I totally applaud my students' refusal to add to the babble of words which characterises the human condition. But as someone who is paid from the public purse to teach foreign languages, I have to adopt something of the attitude of the athletic Sergeant-Major Perry to the clumsiest members of the awkward squad. What, I wonder, can be done to make my students better at expressing themselves, preferably in a foreign language?

Now it may be that history will do this for me. My own explanation of the taciturnity which characterises my students is that they are suffering from a Puritan hangover. The injunction in Matthew V, 37 - 'Let your communication be: Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these commeth of evil' - entered very deeply into the English soul, and can perhaps be countered only by increased exposure to those Continental influences which the Puritans so firmly rejected. In a way, as our experience with the Civil Service has shown, this is already happening. For in the past, no-one represented more adequately the English ideal of unimpeachable taciturnity than the Whitehall Civil Servant, and yet there they are, in Leeds, at this very moment, chattering away as though Bunyan and Cromwell had never been born.

Perhaps, as a result of our continued exposure to Europe, a gradual change will come over our attitude towards communication in general as well as to foreign languages in particular. Perhaps we shall cease to act as though Quentin Crisp really meant it and was right when he said that there was no point in learning to speak French or German because everybody knew that foreigners were only pretending and all started to speak English again as soon as our back was turned. But until this country's membership of the European Community has the same effect upon undergraduates as it has had upon the Civil Service, is there anything we can do?

In spite of the pessimism which has informed most of what I have said so far, I think there might be, though I hope that my pessimism has had the intended effect of warning people off the idea that there are easy solutions. If we are going to try to make our students into better speakers of French, German or Spanish by using the techniques developed for teaching civil servants, the structure and content of our University courses in modern languages are, as I have already hinted, going to have to change quite radically. The term will no longer be a leisurely stroll through the weekly prose, translation and conversation class, interspersed with the occasional literary tutorial. It will have to consist, instead, of a fortnight during which the student works hard at private preparation of a number of texts, in the target language, dealing with a particular topic - let us say, for example, Great Britain's membership of the European Communities. Some of these texts will naturally be on tape, so that the student will be able to hear the words as well as see them, and this fortnight's preparation will lead up to a week of very intensive instruction of the kind I outlined a quarter of an hour ago. Such instruction will, of course, make quite a demand upon the staff as well as on the student, and we shall all have to put in a lot more contact hours. Then, after this week's intensive tuition, the student will be required to submit written work based on what she or he has learned during the previous three weeks. There will then be a reading week, before the same pattern begins in the second target language. For I do not think that we should discourage the process whereby most students do take two foreign languages, though they will obviously do so in a very different way from the present pattern. The study of literature, for example, will be replaced by that of history, politics and contemporary institutions, and I do not think that there will be much time for comparative historical philology.

Will it work? Well, it might be worth giving it a trial. Indeed, if my understanding is correct, a number of Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education are doing something similar, and I look forward to the comments from colleagues who teach in such institutions. Such an alteration in the pattern and content of our teaching will, of course, mean the virtual abandonment of its traditionally humanistic content, and I hope that there will also be comments on this point as well. These changes will be accompanied by a number of other alterations, such as the increase to one third of the total of marks in Finals for a student's performance in an extended oral. This, I think, if I might be allowed to introduce a topic which Robert Crawshaw is going to talk about in greater detail, is the correct indication of the importance which I would like to give to spoken skills in the

hierarchy of modern language teaching and learning, though here again there will have to be some fundamental changes in the type of oral which we require our students to take. It will not, for example, be what it tends to be nowadays, a short chat on what the student did in France and which books she or he prefers. It will be much more like the kind of specimen lesson and explication de texte required at the French agrégation, and will last upwards of three quarters of an hour. It will test the ability to speak coherently, from notes but without reading them, on a topic of some intellectual interest, to understand and respond to questions and objections, and to show an analytic awareness of the content of the course which the student has just taken. The second third of the marks should, in my view, be given for the student's ability to write both the foreign language and her or his own, while the remaining one third should be given for the range of actual knowledge shown. It is, I recognise, a considerable change from the present pattern, where between a half and two thirds of the marks are given for content, which in practice means the ability to write essays on literature or on what I might call a theoretical knowledge of how the language works and has grown up, and I do take the point that jibes from the School of English about modern languages being 'the applied sciences of the Arts Faculty' will then come to have some foundation in fact. However, since we in the Conservative Party take the view that such prosperity as we enjoy in modern Britain is very much the product of the applied sciences, there is, as Brutus observed to Cassius, no terror in this threat. It passes me by as does the idle wind, which I respect not.

The changes I am talking about will also have to be introduced simultaneously by all the modern language departments at any given University. Anyone who has had the experience of introducing curriculum changes will sympathise here with the remark that trying to carry out reforms at a University is like trying to make love to an elephant. It is extremely difficult, there is no pleasure whatsoever, you stand in imminent danger of being crushed, and you are unlikely to see any results for at least three years. A certain amount of patience will be much in demand, and once again the example of Sergeant-Major Perry will have to be much in people's minds. For he had to recognise that although he personally took great delight in performing on the parallel bars, and had a quite natural aptitude for it, such skills did not come naturally to everybody. We shall still have to be prepared for some pretty silent sessions, animated only by the monologue of the tutor, and by the short, compulsory talks prepared in advance by the participants. For we have to remember that we are all, in relations to our pupils, linguistic Sergeant-Major Perrys, and we must fight - as he fought every day, and as I still fight - against the temptation to say that if I can do it, then so can you. But at least we shall be able to say that we have got our eye on the ball, and that we are trying to do for our students what the tax payers who happen to think about our activities expect us to be doing. I shall, myself, regret the disappearance of literature as anything but an occasional adjunct to a modern languages course - it can come into the reading week, I suppose - and should be most grateful to anyone who suggests how we might keep it. After all it's what I have spent most of my time on, so it would be reassuring to know that it will have some function in my recycled existence.